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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT'S ASEAN 7 MEETING A "LEADING INDICATOR"  
OF U.S. POLITICAL COMMITMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Classified By: E/P Counselor Ike Reed, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Singapore MFA's outgoing Deputy Director for ASEAN Wong Chow Ming highlighted for us November 4 the importance of senior U.S. engagement with ASEAN. U.S. regard for ASEAN confers prestige that helps the organization maintain a central role in the region's institutional architecture, thus helping it avoid domination by emerging regional powers. He urged that the President continue his tradition of meeting with the "ASEAN 7" at APEC, which he described as the "best indicator" of U.S. commitment to the region in the absence of a hoped-for U.S.-ASEAN summit. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Outgoing MFA Senior Deputy Director for ASEAN Wong Chow Ming gave the USG positive marks for its engagement with ASEAN, given the constraints imposed by Burma's membership in the organization, during a November 4 luncheon with EP Counselor. Reviewing his busy tenure in the ASEAN Directorate, during which Singapore hosted ASEAN and pushed through important initiatives including the ASEAN Charter, Wong expressed appreciation for U.S. efforts to demonstrate its regard for ASEAN as an important regional institution. Visible signs of U.S. respect help to bolster ASEAN's efforts to be seen as central to the region's institutional framework, which in turns helps to ensure Southeast Asia will not be dominated by Asia's emerging power, China.

13. (C) Asked what the USG could do better, Wong expressed disappointment that the planned "ASEAN Summit" with the President did not occur. He understood that the situation in Burma made a summit difficult and added that the Singapore government would also like to see the end of the Burmese regime. But he asked that the new administration find a way to hold the summit. In the meantime, Wong urged that the President's traditional meeting with the seven ASEAN members that participate in APEC (the ASEAN 7) be held again at the APEC Leaders Meeting in Lima later this month. In the absence of an ASEAN Summit, he said, the ASEAN 7 meeting is the "best indicator" of the USG's political commitment to ASEAN. While a meeting with part of ASEAN's membership could not be regarded as an official ASEAN event, Wong said ASEAN 7 leaders greatly value meeting with the President and appreciate it as a sincere USG effort to demonstrate its regional engagement.

14. (C) Wong urged that the next administration consider signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). He acknowledged that it would be a largely symbolic gesture and that it would not, by itself, bring the USG lasting gratitude or goodwill. But it would be taken as a sign of U.S.

"political commitment" to ASEAN, strengthen ASEAN's prestige, and thus help ensure ASEAN remains less susceptible to regional power domination within Asia's emerging institutional framework.

15. (C) Wong hoped that eventually the two parties could negotiate a US-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA). He understood that Burma remains a major obstacle and that some other ASEAN members are not yet ready for the kind of high-standard FTA the United States would pursue, but thought an FTA was a worthy long-term goal with important strategic implications. In the meantime, Wong appreciated our Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement as a useful interim step.

16. (SBU) NOTE: A leading strategist and workhorse during Singapore's productive 2007-2008 chairmanship of ASEAN, Wong will take up his new post as Singapore's Deputy High Commissioner in New Delhi before the end of the year. END NOTE.

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